

Information Pack 3:

Richard III – his reputation and appearance

In searching for Richard III's remains, one of the Looking for Richard team's fundamental motivations was to challenge the image of Richard III as a usurper and tyrant that had been created by Tudor historians and endured through Shakespeare's portrayal. They aimed to replace this with an image that better reflected their own understanding of the reality of his life in its historical context. As Philippa Langley stated:

'He was a man of his times, a medieval man, for sure... The man I could see in the historical sources was a man who seemed very concerned with justice and loyalty and doing the right thing most of the time.' *'I wanted him treated as a human being, a fallen warrior on the battlefield'.*

Even Richard's physical appearance, which the Tudors had exploited in order to portray his reign and person so negatively, was to be the subject of new research using forensic techniques. As a result of this research, and as the debate raged over where and how Richard should be buried, a gradual shift took place in the collective understanding of Richard's life, with a real questioning of the authenticity of those ideas inherited over generations.

This change in perception was clearly demonstrated through a transformation in the journalistic reporting on his life following the discovery of his remains in September 2012. There was a shift from a traditional narrative focused on Richard III as a tyrant, child-killer, despot or hero to a more neutral appraisal of Richard as a king.

While this shift is evident in journalism, media outlets online and groups directly involved with the discussion over the future fate and reality of Richard's remains rallied around emotive notions of the former monarch, which sought in some ways to construct a powerful image of his personality and monarchy. Their consistent use of epithets such as the 'last Plantagenet king', the 'last king to die in battle', 'warrior king' or focusing upon his connections to the north of England, since "his own munificence endeared him to the people of the north", exhibits a romanticised view perhaps as far from the 'reality' as that conveyed by our Tudor ancestors. This is also true for other perspectives of the debate, with some supporters of a Catholic burial contrasting Richard's piety with that of the later Tudors, especially Henry VIII, who instigated the Reformation and the break with Rome.

Most of all, this wide variety of emotive perspectives reflects the subjectivity of our understanding of Richard's life. Each individual, and certainly every group involved in the debate surrounding his rediscovery, developed their own idea of Richard's reality through the information available, often seizing upon specific traits. The result is that a number of Richard IIIs, each with their distinct values and characteristics, populate our history and our contemporary views. Despite being one individual, like all of us Richard exhibited different characteristics in his own lifetime according to different contexts: so he may have been at once a warrior, a pious man, a tyrant, murderer or usurper, a northern lord and a king at Westminster. With regards to the debates following the discovery of Richard's remains, and with one and many Richards to consider, it may be impossible for us to ever know which 'reality' reflected the king's final wishes concerning his burial, yet the discussion following his discovery has demonstrated that each idea has a certain validity.

The scientific studies undertaken following the discovery of Richard's remains certainly modify our understanding of Richard's physical person. Perhaps one of the greatest and most immediate shocks was the extent of Richard's spinal curvature due to scoliosis. Leading up to the dig, it had been argued that the skeleton itself would represent one way of disproving the Tudor rumour of Richard's 'hunchback', yet some of this reality must have permeated the later Tudor image of the king. A later Channel 4 documentary, "The New Evidence", suggested that Richard's scoliosis may not have prevented him from participating in combat, and this belief paradoxically led to one journalist asserting that the studies of his scoliosis "puts to bed the question over quite how hunchbacked the king was... The reality, it seems, is not quite so extreme". Clearly, the subject of Richard's spine cut through both the Tudor ideal and that of devoted Ricardians to create a hybrid reality between the two existing ideas, the notion of a king who did experience a physical disability, yet one which did not prevent his participation in those events which define his status for many as a 'warrior king'.

Furthermore, the sequencing of Richard's genome offered a complete reassessment of Richard's appearance, with the Society of Antiquaries of London claiming that the findings matched their near-contemporary portrait of the king with grey-blue eyes and light brown hair, distinct from the later dark and hunched portrait of the National Gallery. Yet neither of these portraits corresponds to the facial reconstruction based on Richard's remains by Professor Caroline Wilkinson, an anthropologist at Liverpool John Moores University, which was adapted following the presentation of the DNA evidence in March 2015 to show Richard with blue eyes and blonde hair. This divergence in conceptions of Richard's appearance, with some arguing that the evidence confirmed the early portrait, and others endorsing the

modern facial reconstruction, reflects how this data fermented new and conflicting ideas about Richard III.

The potential for scientific research (and especially DNA) to provoke rumours, imbuing findings with a sense of certainty, was further demonstrated following tests on Richard's living relatives. Scientists uncovered a "false-paternity" event, a break in the Beaufort line of descent, which cast doubt upon Queen Elizabeth II's own 'entangled' ancestry going back to Mary Queen of Scots (Henry VII's great-granddaughter) and Edward IV. Although the findings have no real constitutional or genealogical consequences, their extensive treatment in the press demonstrates just how Richard III's discovery could impact realities far beyond his own, shedding light on aspects of public life in the UK which are typically taken for granted. These discoveries marked a turning point in the relationship between the general public, the world of academia, and our sense of a historical reality.

Three images of Richard III over time. Left, a modern copy of Richard's portrait housed at the Society of Antiquaries, London (c. 1510-1540). Centre, Richard III portrait, National Portrait Gallery, late 16th century. Right, Professor Wilkinson's facial reconstruction, as of March 2015.



Image Credit: Richard III Society,
http://www.richardiii.net/2_4_0_riii_appearance.php

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